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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a perspective on issues among small schools in Canada through an analysis of topics that focus on Ontario. During the early phase of the small school movement, many educators believed that "small" represented a deleterious condition. After researchers examined negative conditions among larger schools, however, educators reconsidered the benefits of small schools and now regard them as having unique educational settings. What constitutes a small school and a quality curriculum are current issues. Enrollment declines in Ontario secondary schools have led to contraction of program offerings, but quality is not necessarily measured by the number of courses. Research is needed that distinguishes between the effects of ruralness and of smallness. Under the scrutiny of the public, media, researchers, and futurists, the checking for quality and for social responsiveness will reveal both positive and negative characteristics of small schools. With the impetus toward individualized instruction, the effects of distance, isolation, and curriculum breadth could be erased by information technologies. The ministry should support small schools for their unique needs. Research needs include longitudinal studies of small school students and analysis of school strategies. University teacher education programs should provide greater preparation for small or rural settings. (CJH)

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FROM RHETORIC TO ACTION:

APPROACHES TO SMALL SCHOOLS

FOR THE COMING DECADE

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EA 018 937

Keynote speech delivered to 2nd Annual Canadian National Symposium in Small Schools, Quetico Conference Centre, Atikokan, Ontario, October 1986.

SPEECH

INTRODUCTION

I am certainly pleased to be here at the 2nd National Symposium on Small Schools in Canada, and especially pleased to be given the opportunity to provide the keynote address for the symposium. This is especially important to me because after being part of the group in Manitoba that initiated the first symposium last year, I then had to miss it due to a change in jobs.

Furthermore, this symposium takes on another special meaning to me since I am now not just talking about the things people experience in administering small school jurisdiction, but now I'm doing it as a Dean of a small Faculty of Education. And this experience has certainly verified for me the strengths and weaknesses of small school operations. It has also done nothing to dispell in me the notion that small and quality can go together. But I'm getting a little ahead of myself, my time is limited with you today and many of you have had long trips and are anxious to start hearing what your colleagues from other provinces have to say. However, if we are to be effective in our disucssions here and, in fact, effective in whatever our approaches to small schools may be, then I believe it is necessary for us to regularly stand back and take a look at ourselves and to take stock of our thoughts and actions and approaches to small schools in Canada.

Therefore, what I'd like to do along with you tonight is to stand back from our close, and sometimes emotional, involvement and look at the small schools movement in Canada. Specifically I'd like to do the following:

- briefly sketch several phases of the approaches to the issues of small schools

- examine the effect of forces at play today on schools and education in general and how these forces might affect our thinking about small schools

- suggest some agendas for future action by all agencies involved with small school jurisdiction

APPROACHES TO SMALL SCHOOLS

The first recognizable small schools movement was not a particularly positive one for small schools since it was characterized by consolidation and closure. This was the era when many of the public, the elected officials and school administrators were convinced that 'small' represented a tremendously deleterious situation for schools. It was not uncommon to hear suggestions that all high schools under 2000 should be closed and no elementary school under 500 should be allowed to exist. We had research in Ontario that identified how much better the situation was in urban (ie. larger) schools (Humphreys, 1972). In general, there was little research to substantiate the claims of superiority for the larger school setting, but none the less, high schools were consolidated and one room schools closed and sold with abandon. I started teaching in the Collingwood area and if the Ministry ever decided to go back to one room schools, I personally know a a number of these 'one room schools' the government could buy back, replete with hot tubs and saunas, for somewhere in the $100,000 range.

At any rate, during this phase the issue for small schools was survival and I call this the 'small is the pits' phase. However, it wasn't too long into this consolidation movement before educators and researchers started looking more closely at the larger schools they had created. Barker and Gump (1962), for instance, proposed what they called the 'inside-outside' paradox of large schools, where larger was seen as impressive from the outside but not really as impressive when you took a look at the inside. Other research (Hind, 1979) questioned the financial benefits that were supposedly accrued to consolidation. In essence, and perhaps serendipitously, educators were beginning to wonder if small schools weren't such bad places after all. From rural locations came issues like a concern for rural development, recognition of cultural pluralism and a general awareness of the benefits of small town/community living. From the urban locations came rising instances of school vandalism, a perception of increasing discipline problems and decline of school standards. One serendipitous 'discovery' was the realization that large urban schools were increasingly embracing traditional small, rural one room school educational practices such as individualized instruction, cross-age or family grouping and peer tutoring.

Further research in fact, began to discover that not only was the multigrading situation not deleterious to students, but in fact it was a superior classroom setting for affective development (Pratt, 1984). Lists of the benefits of small schools were generated (Marshall, 1984) and the implication of this 'new' information for small schools was that they were kept open and survival no longer became an issue. Many educators adopted the title of Schumacher's book on development economics as the catch phrase of this second small schools movement: "Small is Beautiful".

However, once the issue of survival was largely out of the way, educators once again took a closer look at the small schools and paid some realistic attention not only to the strengths and benefits of small schools but to their weaknesses as well. In my mind someone who insists on the 'small is beautiful' slogan has not spent much time trying to operate a small educational setting. As Dean of a small Faculty, not only am I responsible for the complex programing and staffing issues that all University Deans must face, I am also the office computer technician, librarian, plant waterer, teacher and starting forward on the University basketball team. I believe it was the white rabbit who said to Alice "You see, here we have to run twice as fast to stay in one place". He could have been describing a small school administrator. Even Schumacher was not saying that small was beautiful, he was saying that economies in small developing nations were unique. And that is exactly the substance of the third approach to small schools: Small is unique, or as I often suggest, 'small is the beautiful pits'.

I believe that is where most of us are now. We believe that small is neither instrinsically good or bad, but rather a unique educational setting. Our task has been one of building on the strength and realistically addressing the weaknesses (Marshall, 1985). What I'd like to do now, however, is to examine some of the forces at play in education today to see what the next small schools movement might look like. I even have another slogan for you, but you'll have to wait a moment for that.

FORCES AT PLAY

Demographic/Political

Due to a combination of demographic and political forces, we are likely to see a continued increase in the number of small secondary schools both in Canada in general and specifically in Ontario. In Ontario, for instance, the extension of funding to Grade 12 in the separate school system will both increase the number of small separate secondary schools and increase the number of public secondary schools where declining enrolment and size become issues of concern. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, it is possible that much of the growth in the number of small secondary schools will take place in urban settings. This situation has several implications for approaches to small schools.

First, defining smallness as it applies to schools is becoming increasingly difficult. We are becoming more and more aware of the fact that small is not a particular number but a set of symptoms. For instance, in Ontario, less than 400 or 500 students in a high school is considered small, while in Manitoba this would be average to large while a small high school would have less than 200. While I was in India a few years ago, I visited an 'average' elementary school with an enrolment of 4500. With the recent declines in size in Ontario secondary schools we are noticing that the concerns are not caused by any particular size, but simply by the need to contract program offerings. The high school that has contracted from 1000 to 700 is experiencing more 'size' problems than the one that has remained stable at 350.

A second implication is the growing awareness that quality does not necessarily equal breadth. That is, the quality of a secondary school is not necessarily measured by the number of different courses offered. This is what Barker and Gump (1964) where refering to with their comment about the "inside .. outside paradox." I visited many 'quality' high schools in Manitoba that had less than 100 students and offered less than 50 secondary credits. One of these schools won the national Reach for the Top Championship in 1984. As more and more schools face declining enrolment, parents, teachers and school board officials are starting to realize that simply because a school can't be all things to all

students, does not mean it cannot do some things very well. In many ways it goes back to what I suggested earlier; that the best approach to small schools today is to recognize their uniqueness and not try and recreate them in the image of the large school. If small high schools try and compete with larger high schools on the basis of number of credits offered, then small schools will always be seen as second class schools.

A third implication has to do with the evidence we have used to support the existence of the small school. If we look at the usual lists of benefits and strengths of small schools, it is evident that many of the benefits that we accrue to small schools actually have more to do with their location in a rural setting rather than their size. When we are looking for literature, research, etc. on small schools, we use the term 'rural' in our search descriptors. The only magazine/journal I know that addresses 'small' issues is the U.S. based Rural Education/Rural School Review. Much of the small schools research that I have seen has been done in Alaska. My point here is that we have never really been able to distinguish between the effects of ruralness and the effects of smallness. However the demographic and political forces I mentioned previously (eg. different funding arrangements)are weakening the traditional small-rural connection and consequently small is now being seen more in isolation from ruralness. On the one hand, this could result in someone suggesting that much of our previous knowledge, research and assumptions about small are becoming increasingly irrelevant. On the other hand, the result could be the development of research activities to separate more clearly the effects of size. And such research would be welcome.

One other demographic item should be mentioned before I move on to another area, and this is the issue of teacher supply/demand. Most supply/demand projections suggest that, certainly within the next decade, we will be facing a shortage of teachers. Those of you involved with small schools in more rural, remote locations, might speculate (from past experiences?) on the implications for you of a shortage of qualified teachers? We may certainly have to do a better job of selling the good side of teaching in smaller school settings.

Social Expectations

The second force that I suggest will affect the small school movement is the expectation that society has for education over the coming decade and where these expectations will come from. There certainly appears to be a growing concern from the taxpaying public with the products of the school system. Essentially, there appears to be increased demands upon us to prove that we are doing that which we are supposed to do. The problem for us as educators is, of course, the fact that there are widely diverging perspectives of both 'what' we are supposed to do and how we are to 'prove' that we are doing it well. I would suggest that there are at least three sources of information for educators (small schools or otherwise) to help them sort out the 'what' and the 'how to prove'.

The first source of information is the general public and the public media. In this case the resurgence of concern for quality in the public school is certainly evident. Reports like the U.S. "The Nation at Risk" study have thrown doubts on the quality of the public school system in the U.S. and provided a collection of prescriptions for solving the educational maladies in the U.S. Media efforts like Time Magazine's "Help, Teach Can't Teach"(1980) and Newsweek's "Why Public Schools Fail"(1981) have contributed to public speculation about the quality of education. Politicians and academics have, of course, been quick to respond to public concerns in this area and advanced their own "quality education" initiatives. A virtual cottage industry has sprung up in the area of books which analyze and examine American education.

The crux of all of this is the re-examination of the quality of schooling. However, the important thing for small schools is that throughout this introspective analysis of educational quality, there is little (if any) reference to either size or breadth. For instance, the Canadian Education Association sponsored 1984 Gallup poll of Canadian attitudes to education identified quality, up-to-date curriculum, teacher interest, active learning and good climate as things that were most important in schools. There is nothing in this and other similar lists that aren't attainable by small elementary or

secondary schools.

A second source of information supports the small school position as well. There has been considerable research over the past decade in the area of effective schools. Some researchers have been quite prescriptive in providing lists of the attributes of schools that are more effective than others in producing student learning. For instance, Clark (1984) in summarizing much of the school effectiveness research suggested that "Schools that matter" could be characterized as:

(1) Focussing upon academic achievement of students
(2) Maintaining high expectations for student achievement
(3) Allocating and utilizing academic learning time effectively and efficiently
(4) Maintaining an orderly and supportive school climate
(5) Providing learning opportunities for teachers as well as students
(6) Using regular programs of evaluation and feedback.

Again, as with public/political demands for quality I see little in the expectations of the school effectiveness research that refers to breadth or that is mitigated by size. From both information areas, the concern is for quality not quantity. The major implication is as I said before (and will probably say again) our best strategy in the small schools area for both improvement and survival is not to compete in program breadth with larger schools but to compete equally on the issues of quality such as those identified in the school effectiveness research. However, a third information source may not have as positive a message for small schools.

The same concerns for school quality poses other questions that relates to the type of schooling we might envision being required to help our children survive through a future generation. Some call it the curriculum for the future and there is considerable debate whether topics like peace education, child abuse, international development, multiculturalism, belong in the school curriculum. Whatever our feelings, there is pressure from some segments of society to produce children who have the broadest possible understanding of their place in society. This could mean, for instance, an understanding of other cultures and idealogies. One researcher calls this psychological maturity (Sprinthall, 1983)

My point is that with this concern the small school could be in trouble -- especially where small is isolated either geographically or idealogically. I've heard it questioned whether a Keegstra could have existed in a 'larger urban school'. One impact of this particular perspective is that small could start to become synonimous with 'narrow. This is certainly one of the reservations many educators have regarding small private schools.

At any rate, small schools like all educational institutions are under increasing scrutiny from the public, the politicians, the researchers and the futurists. They are checking for quality and for social responsiveness and in some ways the small school will win and in others lose but in either case small school educators will not be able to ignore these concerns.

Technology

The third and final force I will identify for you today is the one that leads me to propose a possible new 'slogan' for the small schools movement. I would suggest that today there is no technological reason why every child in Ontario (Canada? World?) could not have delivered to their doorstep any course that is being delivered in any school in Canada today. Simply, existing (much less future) information technologies provide the possibility of totally eliminating the necessities of classroom organized institutions to teach facts. Individualized instruction is coming into its own, not because of any new instructionally valid reason (we have known the value of individualized instruction for a long time), or for any new technological reason (much of the technology was there 15 years when I was studying instructional design). What I believe is happening is that the political, social, research, etc. forces I have mentioned earlier have provided new legitimacy and impetus to the individualized delivery of course materials by information technology. Alaska is now delivering a complete high school program through distance delivery (Foss, 1986). Athabasca University provides a complete undergraduate degree, totally through distance delivery (and has been doing so for 15 years). Recently announced initiatives in distance delivery by the Ministry of Education and the Independent Learning Centre are witness to the fact that suddenly the application of technologies to program delivery in the secondary school is a legitimate proposal.

But I'm sure most of you have heard many 'harbinger's of the future' predict the impact of technology on education and I don't particularly want to join that club. I do, however, want to suggest that the distance delivery technology is real, is here, is being used and will have some impact upon the small school. Specifically, it could mean that the effects of distance, isolation and breadth will be erased. And that leads me to the new slogan. We started first (a few decades ago) with the notion that small is bad — the "pits" as the kids say today. We moved to the serendipitous discovery that small was "beautiful". Reality then made us realize that small is actually the "beautiful pits" and that what we really mean to say is that small is unique. And now, all of the

forces at play are coalescing with the technology and, I think, defining the next slogan for small schools as "small is irrelevant". And I also believe that we should see this as a good thing, as we finally reach a point where no one ever considers closing a small school because of issues related to program quality or breadth.

The Action

That is the end of the 'rhetoric' section of the title of my address tonight. It leaves me about 30 sections to cover the 'action' section; to examine what all of us will have to do to eventually make future meetings like this irrelevant?

From the Ministry perspective, I think that it is the necessity for the Ministry to provide direct support to small schools and jurisdictions. By direct support, I mean providing both the human and dollar resources to small school jurisdiction to do things that are beyond their local ability. Specifically this could include, for instance, the provision of local curriculum consultants, not simply available from a central office when needed, but actually located within the small school jurisdiction. Manitoba is roughly divided into two equal parts -- Winnipeg and elsewhere. When we examined the availability of local curriculum support in Manitoba we found that over 80% of the school division level consultants were within the Urban Winnipeg boards. The answer was to put Ministry lines directly into small rural divisions that couldn't afford to hire their own local consultants. In Ontario, a similar direct action/support could easily be used by the Ministry in the area of curriculum development and implementation. Another obvious area is assisting smaller jurisdictions with the purchase of the capital items required to support a distance delivery situation. The 'start up' costs are often beyond all but the largest and wealthiest Boards.

From the University perspective there are two specific action areas. The first is research, specifically the absence of research regarding small schools. Some suggestions in this regard might include (i) longitudinal studies of small high school students. What difference does program breadth have on later career success? (ii) What strategies are small high schools using to cope with things like limited program offerings? (iii) Further research into the effects and strategies in multigrading and multi-leveling is needed. (iv) Can we separate the effects of size from the effects of geography? These are but a few of a very long list of research questions that can be generated by people working in

small school settings and should be examined by these in the university settings with the skills and expertise to research such complex educational issues.

A second action area for the universities is a little more direct. A conservative estimate would be that half of our pre-service graduates end up in small and or rural locations. Despite this, we do surprisingly little in our pre-service programs to prepare the student specifically for such a setting. For instance, although we cover many pedagogical issues during the course of a year, it would be difficult to pinpoint exactly where issues in teaching a multi-graded classroom are covered. Furthermore, of a more general concern, the overall preparation program (especially at the secondary level) tends to the side of 'specialist' preparation rather than 'generalist' preparation. The latter is, of course, the kind needed and usually preferred in the small school. Practice teaching is another area where Faculties can help out the small school. Both Nipissing and Lakehead insist that some practice teaching be in Northern Ontario and hopefully this helps both students and boards make 'career' choices. Further to this, however, all Faculties could identify 'small' settings for at least the interested student to practice teach in.

Finally, I have some brief observations for parents, teachers and school boards, specifically regarding the issue of small school closure. First, parents and teachers are going to have to recognize that some small schools should be closed. There is not time here to discuss exactly when that might be (see for example Marshall, 1985) but it is necessary to parents and teachers to recognize that there is a downside to the small school. Conversely, school boards should take great care in establishing their rationales for school closure. My experience in this regard suggests that a school has to get very small before program arguments hold much substance. Boards would be wise to seek outside assistance in the process of school closure.

Conclusion

As is typical (and perhaps expected?) in a keynote address like this one, I have spent more time on the rhetoric than the action. I'm sure the 'action' over the next few days will more than balance my rhetoric. I do hope, however, that my message tonight helps provide a basis for the discussions over the next couple of days and put together, our work here together establishes a national perspective on the issues in small schools in Canada.

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